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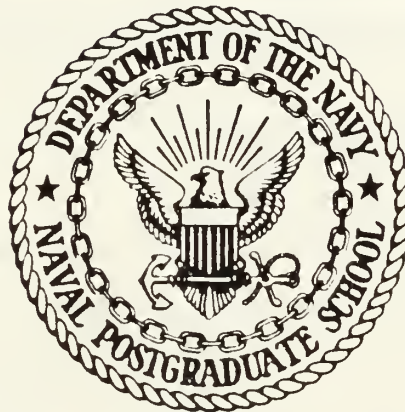






# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

Monterey, California



## THESIS

TO BE THE BEST,  
A STUDY OF EXCELLENCE IN  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS INFANTRY BATTALIONS

by

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and  
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December 1985

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T226694



# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION		1b RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS	
SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY		3 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.	
DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE			
PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)	
NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION Naval Postgraduate School	6b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) 54	7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION Naval Postgraduate School	
ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Monterey, California 93943-5100		7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Monterey, California 93943-5100	
NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION	8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)	9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER	
ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		10 SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS	
		PROGRAM ELEMENT NO	PROJECT NO
		TASK NO	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO
TITLE (Include Security Classification) TO BE THE BEST, A STUDY OF EXCELLENCE IN U.S. MARINE CORPS INFANTRY BATTALIONS			
PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) Morrison, Matt R., Tibbits Jr., Keith A.			
1 TYPE OF REPORT Master's Thesis	13b TIME COVERED FROM TO	14 DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 1985 December	15 PAGE COUNT 82
SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION			
COSATI CODES		18 SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)	
FIELD	GROUP	Infantry Battalions Marine Corps	
		Leadership Excellence	
		Esprit de Corps Effectiveness	
ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)			
<p>"To be the Best, A Study of Excellence in United States Marine Corps Infantry Battalions" is a study conducted to test the hypothesis that common attributes are shared by excellent battalions. Interviews were conducted with thirty-one senior infantry officers from various stateside commands, from which it was concluded that excellent battalions do possess a common set of attributes that account for their superior performance. To further develop this narrative model of excellence, and present a clearer picture of how an excellent battalion operates, interviews were subsequently conducted with staff noncommissioned officers, noncommissioned officers, and junior enlisted men from various infantry units. Attributes dealing with balanced excellence, leadership, emphasis on goals, culture and values, and the environment of excellence are discussed in detail.</p>			
DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS		21 ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION Unclassified	
a NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL Professor Reuben T. Harris		22b TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) (408) 646-2539	22c OFFICE SYMBOL 54He

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To Be the Best ,  
A Study of Excellence in  
United States Marine Corps Infantry Battalions

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MASTER OF SCIENCE IN MANAGEMENT

from the

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
December 1985

## **ABSTRACT**

"To be the Best, A Study of Excellence in United States Marine Corps Infantry Battalions" is a study conducted to test the hypothesis that common attributes are shared by excellent battalions. Interviews were conducted with thirty-one senior infantry officers from various stateside commands, from which it was concluded that excellent battalions do possess a common set of attributes that account for their superior performance. To further develop this narrative model of excellence, and present a clearer picture of how an excellent battalion operates, interviews were subsequently conducted with staff noncommissioned officers, noncommissioned officers, and junior enlisted men from various infantry units. Attributes dealing with balanced excellence, leadership, emphasis on goals, culture and values, and the environment of excellence are discussed in detail.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

"I have just returned from visiting the Marines at the front, and there is not a finer fighting organization in the world!" General of the Army, Douglas MacArthur, 21 September 1950.

### A. **WHY STUDY EXCELLENCE, AGAIN?**

According to the research work of Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., published in the management best seller In Search of Excellence; Lessons from America's Best-run Companies, there are certain identifiable traits which are common to America's most successful business operations. It is because of these traits that these corporations have sustained superior performance and growth.

The "excellence" topic is also receiving considerable attention in the academic world. Our thesis is part of an ongoing research effort on "Excellence in the Military" headed by Dr. Reuben Harris, Associate Professor of Management at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS). Studies have been and are currently being conducted on organizations within all branches of the military service. Recently completed NPS studies on "Excellence in the Surface Navy" and "Excellence in the Combat Arms" (U.S. Army) have received considerable media attention, and positive feedback from senior military officers. Results from completed studies indicate that excellent units do share common attributes and characteristics which set them apart from the rest. Our thesis is a test of this hypothesis within the infantry battalions of the United States Marine Corps.

## **B. WHAT WE DID**

We selected the Marine Corps infantry battalion as the target for our research. The infantry battalion provided us with models that are observable and accessible on both east and west coasts. They are standardized in both manpower and equipment, and are time tested--many of these outfits have been around for quite some time. There was no better place for us to begin than with the battalion, for in the final analysis it all comes down to the infantryman and his ability to successfully accomplish his mission. Aviation, artillery, tank, and logistic outfits, you name it, they're all part of the Marine Corps team--however, their ultimate purpose is to support the young Marine rifleman.

Our research, like the other studies, was to be conducted in two phases. In Phase I, we began by interviewing 31 senior infantry leaders (8 were general officers, the rest were colonels)<sup>1</sup>. We spoke with current and former division, regimental, and battalion commanders, as well as officers from Headquarters Marine Corps, Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) Headquarters, and division staffs. Our emphasis here was to focus on the subjective viewpoints of these individuals around the following concepts: their definition of excellence; their personal indicators of excellence; the characteristics that set the excellent battalion apart; and, when thinking of superior performance, which infantry battalions fit their criteria for excellence. From these interviews, our aim was to develop a narrative model of excellence. We also had hoped to identify infantry battalions, which in the collective opinion of those interviewed, were the embodiment of excellence and superior performance. In Phase II our attention was to be focused on the

identified infantry battalions. As was the case with the other studies, in judging excellence we desired to rely predominately on the subjective opinions of senior officers, rather than on numerical, quantitative indicators. Because, in the final analysis it is the opinions of senior officers that count the most when determining what is considered good and bad and who will be selected to lead in the future.

In the research conducted on "Excellence in the Combat Arms" the authors asked the senior officers they interviewed to nominate excellent units that met their criteria for excellence. As a result of the nominations, seven high performing battalions were singled out. Similarly in the study of "Excellence in the Surface Navy" the authors wrote, "After these senior officers provided us with their views on surface ship excellence, we asked them to identify ships that personified excellence as they had described it. This they did with gusto."

As we approached the end of Phase I, we hoped to have an accurate "triangulated fix" on some truly superior infantry battalions--the excellent ones. At this point we were ready to roll up our sleeves, hunker down, and find out what makes these excellent outfits tick. But along the way, we heard many officers say, "Hold on captain, stop for a moment!" Here was the major difference between our study, and the others.

We weren't given the names of the excellent outfits. It wasn't because they were all considered excellent, nor was it because there were none that fit the criteria for excellence. Many times we heard that there may be certain units who are superior to others, but we were also told in the same breath, that there are many other factors, such as "the cycle of the unit" and "personnel turbulence", that must be considered. We were to discover

that to take a "snapshot in time", and at that particular moment say that 1st battalion is excellent and 2nd battalion is not, would be unrealistic and even unfair. Furthermore, when we visited the divisions and regiments, it was more than just a question of a snapshot in time. It was an unwritten, ethical violation for a commander to say that 1st battalion was better than the rest. As a division or regimental commander, to single out battalions, at the expense of the others would only harm and serve to undermine the unity, loyalty, and esprit de corps that they worked so hard to develop. To those commanders, it was a violation of the "Marine Ethic" upon which the battalion, the regiment, the division, and the entire Marine Corps team itself is built.

### **C. WE REGROUPED**

What we had witnessed was a thing of beauty, and it made us even more proud to be Marines. Perhaps, it's not surprising to some that we "discovered" this. But it emphasized the feelings of those we interviewed--that of teamwork, loyalty, faithfulness, and esprit de corps--elements that foster an environment of excellence throughout our Corps.

To further develop our narrative model of excellence, and paint a clearer picture of what an excellent battalion looks like and how it does business, we expanded our research. We included staff noncommissioned officers (SNCO's), noncommissioned officers (NCO's), and junior enlisted men from various infantry units throughout the Marine Corps.<sup>2</sup> It was our desire to complete our narrative of excellence with the viewpoints of those Marines most affected by the actions of the organization and to see how it

works--not only from the top down, but also from the perspective of the young Marine.

Our research provided us the opportunity of a lifetime. We spoke with Marines young and old, on topics which ranged from the future of our Corps to digging a fighting hole. All that we heard was important to us and much of it was inspiring. It was amazing what people will tell you when they have an audience that just listens and wants to hear more!

We came away from these conversations with a feeling of accomplishment and at times, with a sense that we had happened upon an inner secret of our Corps. Maybe we did. It is our hope then, that in the following pages we do justice in conveying to you, the messages that were told so well to us.

## **II. BALANCED EXCELLENCE**

### **A. BALANCED EXCELLENCE ACROSS THE BOARD**

There was no doubt in the minds of those we spoke with that truly excellent units, the superior units, possess balanced excellence. So what is balanced excellence? We heard wide-ranging, descriptive definitions, but each revolved around a common theme--balanced excellence across the board. Excellent units do the best they can with the assets they have, all of the time on all of the tasks. They meet or exceed their own desired level of performance over the entire spectrum of operational and administrative requirements--they hit all of the wickets. An excellent unit does more than just enough to get by, balanced excellence demands it. Balanced excellence requires that standards be set high in all areas, and that those standards be realistic and achievable. High standards doesn't mean that a unit receive an "A+" in everything it attempts. That's where the realistic and achievable enters in. Commanders aren't impressed with the outfit that is #1 in one area and last in another. They're more impressed with the outfit that can hold its own in all areas. It may not be #1 in any given area, but doesn't fall down in any either. A colonel told us that excellence requires a total package. "You might be the greatest tactician since Rommel, but if all of your vehicles are on the deadline, I'm not impressed."

### **B. THREADS OF STRENGTH**

Outfits with balanced excellence have no weak spots. You can send them anywhere to do anything and expect great outcomes. The behavior of their

troops is exemplary even in areas where other service units have had problems. They do well in the field from the skills of the small unit leader to crew served weapons. In garrison, whatever the measures happen to be, they do well. Tactical, logistical, and administrative soundness, it's all there. It takes strong leadership, initiative, and imagination and often, just doing things by the book.

Excellent units don't dwell on their strong points, they shore up their weak ones. They continually move to improve those areas where they feel they may not be at their best. To quote a former division commander, "I use the analogy of a unit and a sandbag. You pull one thread from it, no matter where, and sooner or later it will begin to leak. Personnel management, material management all lead to successful field operations. A good outfit has all of this. They are consistent, solid and fair. No unit has outstanding people in all billets, but an excellent unit will get the most out of all the people they have and work to strengthen their weak threads--they have no leaks."

### **C. WE'RE GARRISON MARINES**

Ever hear that statement before? Probably not. You most likely heard "We're field Marines." We found that you won't hear one of these statements from an excellent outfit--you'll hear both. There's no doubt, however, that in our past there has been a unit or two that has shined on a field exercise but was not quite as brilliant in garrison. So with this in mind, we asked the senior Marines we spoke with if there is such a beast as "Field Marines" and if there is, is it a common occurrence and can it be sustained?

One current regimental commander said, "... all these qualities apply to both garrison and in the field. They're probably more important in garrison because that's the unfun part. The way a unit performs in garrison is a good indicator of excellence, absolutely. An average performing unit (in garrison) could possibly shine in the field, but I wouldn't characterize that unit as excellent, because it lacks that balanced excellence. Sooner or later, the lack of balance in garrison will reflect on operations in the field. You might get by for a while, but not for long. You can say, 'I'm a field Marine', but you've also got to say 'I'm a garrison Marine as well', to be excellent in my view. If you can't say that, you don't have balanced excellence."

So what goes on in garrison? Surely garrison life is not made up of the stuff we Marines joined our Corps to do. So why is it so important? We were told why. A former division commander said, "We're field Marines not garrison Marines, that's bull----! There's no such thing. If Marines don't take care of it in garrison they'll never do it in the field. It's attention to detail in garrison--it carries over into the field. If you fall down in garrison, you'll fall down in the field. You've got to be able to do it all, the truly superior ones do it all. The ones who characterize themselves as field Marines are kidding themselves. It looks great and sounds great but sooner or later it becomes apparent that there is something wrong--there's no balance."

And from the viewpoint of another regimental commander, "I've never believed in the concept that 'well, they don't do well in garrison but they're field Marines' - there's no such thing. A Marine that does it in garrison will do it in the field. If you can't do it in garrison, you can't run to the field to hide and attempt to save yourself--your problems are going to follow you there too."

Perhaps it's a myth more than a fact that the legend known as "Field Marines" exist. An outfit must be good in garrison so that they possess the sound administrative and logistic support, as well as the maintenance and material readiness that will allow them to be successful in the field. The bulk of a unit's time is spent in garrison and its associated challenges are critical for success. The garrison side of the "operational readiness equation" must be maintained for balanced excellence to exist.

This notion carries itself to the individual Marine as well. A high performance machine is only as good as its parts. The myth that "I'm a field Marine" doesn't exist in an excellent unit. As a former battalion commander told it, "I think that the characteristics of excellence apply to both the field and garrison, and it applies to the individual Marine too. If the gear isn't made ready in garrison, it won't work in the field. Sloppy garrison habits translate to sloppy field habits. Poor discipline in garrison will follow to the field. It's like the old adage we sometimes hear about--the Marine who is good in the field but poor in garrison. Yes, he may be strong and physically fit--he may be the type who walks through doors instead of opening them--but he is probably also the guy that when his pack gets too heavy, throws his E-tool<sup>3</sup> over the bank. Consequently, he may be good today during the hump, but not so good tomorrow when he can't dig a fighting hole. Excellent battalions--just as excellent Marines--take care of things both in garrison and in the field. It all sort of fits together."

Administration, logistics, material readiness, care of weapons and equipment, military appearance and bearing, courtesies and customs--how do these standards equate to being able to fight?

Excellent units and their Marines possess the ability to translate these standard garrison requirements to the field. The attitude of accomplishing the mission, the sense of professionalism and attention to detail that serves a unit well in garrison will also serve it well in the field. A healthy unit will be good in both. An excellent unit will do the things in garrison that will get it off the line of departure on time and ensure it's success once it's crossed. "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war."

#### **D. EVERY DAY IS RECORD DAY**

Every day is record day, is how one regimental commander put it. "First impressions in the Marine Corps are very important to the individual as well as to the unit. If I were to travel and visit a unit and they know about my visit in advance, then things better be in order. If I were to come down unannounced, I wouldn't expect to see the same perhaps as with an announced visit--you have to put things in perspective--but I wouldn't expect to be greeted by chaos."

Another said; "I believe that first impressions are very important. As Marines we are impatient, cocky, and confident as individuals. It is really a product of our nature to let first impressions carry more weight than they really should. If a Marine does poorly on the first go, he has to do a lot to overcome that initial impression."

Most senior officers said that the ability to size up a unit, depends upon ones' personality and experience, and also upon the circumstances surrounding the event. Assessment times ranged from a few hours during the initial encounter to a full year of daily observations over the gamut of a units responsibilities. Across the board they told us that it is easier to

assess a unit in combat than in garrison. A general officer asserted, "How long it takes me to form an opinion of a battalion depends upon the scenario. I can't, nor will I make snap judgements, as I feel I can only get a superficial view in that situation. Everyone can have a bad day and I keep that in mind. I do feel that in combat you can simply watch a unit operate and make a snap judgement and probably be right. In garrison, the pressures and requirements are different. It just takes more time to judge and you shouldn't make snap judgements."

One colonel told us that when he has an initial bad opinion of a unit, he always gives them the benefit of the doubt on the chance that he could be wrong, and that perhaps his own prejudices were seeping into the equation. One former commander saw first impressions as part of the job. "Sometimes it doesn't take very long to form an impression of a unit, particularly if it's a bad one. First impressions are very important. Military leaders are prone to make snap judgements, whether it's an assessment of a tactical situation or the assessment of a commander and his unit. We have to in many cases, that's what we get paid to do and we're certainly not infallible."

Certain commanders placed greater credence in first impressions than others did. But most agreed, however, that first impressions are often quite accurate. A former assistant division commander called it this way, "It shouldn't take too long to form an opinion of a unit--a couple of days in most cases--it depends upon the commanders vantage point. Just because of the distance, it may take a division commander longer than a regimental commander, but then again, some individuals have an innate ability to size up an individual or an outfit immediately and be pretty damned accurate in the assessment. First impressions are important, but they're really never put to

the test, in that I have never had to make a decision concerning a unit based on that first impression. Based on my experience and in my opinion, first impressions are generally accurate and are usually borne out to be correct."

What are first impressions made of? What are the signals that clue a commander and cause that initial impression to be formed? First impressions often come about in a rather passive setting. They're made by observing and listening. The observations may occur through the reading of daily message traffic and the various reports that come across a commanders desk, or by that initial trip to the battalion area. Frequently, a report generated by a unit and the daily message traffic is the first contact a new commander has with a unit. They're the first signals and indicators the commander sees concerning the state of the unit. Are the reports accurate, timely and correct? Does the message traffic indicate high morale, infrequent unauthorized absences, swift but fair disciplinary action, high material readiness and strong career planning statistics?

First impressions are also formed and influenced by listening to others; seniors, peers and subordinates. We heard many times that the best information system in the Marine Corps is the young enlisted man and if you need to put your finger on the pulse of a unit, talk to the troops. The point is, that when you're out there playing ball with the troops or hunkering down with a Marine in his fighting hole, they're going to tell the "old man" a lot of things they would never tell anybody in the privacy of some office, when he's sitting at the desk with the flags behind him.

First impressions are formed in the gut and are often a combination of brief, intangible events. "It's the things I feel in my stomach", a colonel told us, "the things I can't often actually support, that my first impressions are

based on. The people related things, the personal characteristics of a commander and his unit, the way the men go about their jobs are the things I look at in forming first impressions--not charts and statistics."

One officer, while a member of an Inspector Generals (IG) team, related to us his first encounter with a particular unit. He was to evaluate the unit in close order drill. When the appointed time arrived, the IG told the unit commander that he would cancel the drill due to inclement weather and that it wouldn't be rescheduled because of other inspection commitments. The young OIC of the unit to be drilled was obviously disappointed and asked the IG on behalf of his men, that they drill despite the rain. And drill they did--in the rain--with the remainder of the unit watching, and applauding when they finished.

A commander observes and listens for the little things--the appearance of the troops, how they carry themselves, how they render military courtesies, how they equip themselves, care for weapons, police of the area, how they move in the field, the respect given to small unit leaders, do they enjoy what they're doing and do they enjoy coming to work each morning. These are "real time" inputs to what's going on in a unit.

A general stressed the importance of getting out to see what's going on in a unit to get an initial impression. "I've been in this gun club for 28 years and I like to feel that when I go down to a battalion, I can learn a lot, fast, just by talking to the young Marines. It tells me a lot about the organization--is there an atmosphere of enthusiasm--are the guys upbeat and business like--moving along at a relatively fast pace--do they look you in the eye--is there a high level of personal appearance? Call it MBWA (management by walking around), call it whatever you want to call it, get out

and see what's going on. Ask what and why to the troops to see if they know. Top management in private industry keys on their salesmen to see if the plan is working, the Marine Corps leader keys on the PFC and LCPL to see if the plan is working."

One general summed it this way: "I'd like to say that I look at a battalion for a long time, weigh and evaluate all the factors and then form an opinion--but that's not true. I think, hell I've done it, gone down to a battalion and in a day formed an opinion that that particular unit is a good or screwed up outfit. Those initial observations are not always necessarily true and it may be an unusual or unique circumstance that causes that opinion to be formed. I think that Marines are inclined to make judgements very quickly on what they initially see and I also think that those first opinions are hard to change--even when in light of new evidence they should change. You probably need some varied observations over a period of time to form a valid opinion. It depends on the activity and can take weeks, even months--you shouldn't just rely on a particular snapshot. It may be a human weakness to rely too much on those snapshot opinions, but sometimes you have to."

Overall we found that most officers felt that there was an overreliance on first impressions. However, the bottom line read that first impressions are a fact of life and overrelied upon or not, are extremely important, as every day is record day.

#### **E. OPEN RANKS--MARCH!**

There are too many of them--there aren't enough. They tell a lot about a unit--they're not worth a thing. The polarity of opinions on inspections was

astounding. Though it depended on the nature and the timing of the inspection, all of the people we spoke with felt that to some degree that inspections are important and beneficial--both to the senior commander and to the unit. For the commander, it's his time to see "how goes it." For the unit, a time to shine and the excellent ones do shine indeed. Not only do they shine during the inspection, they also show their polish in their preparation. A good indicator from inspections isn't necessarily the results, but what the impending inspection does to the psyche of the unit beforehand. Do they gripe, complain, request unusually large amounts of supplies and cancel training, or do they move out and do the job without tumult and disruption. The excellent ones just do it.

A former MAF commander told us, "Inspections are good indicators of excellence not necessarily in their results, but in what it takes a unit to get ready for one. If before an inspection things fall to s---, training is sacrificed, and the unit focuses all of its efforts to do things that should have been done all along, that in itself is a big indicator. The excellent unit continues to march with a minimum redirection of effort in preparation, doesn't sacrifice training, doesn't complain, and still gets the job done well--now that says a lot."

As was said, inspections are a commanders time to see. One regimental commander required that each battalion provide one platoon a week, under the flagpole, in cammies, with field gear, and under arms for inspection. This commander found the young trooper to be the greatest "info sink" in the regiment. It provided a great opportunity to find out about discrepancies in pay, promotion, and even family problems that may have gone unchecked. This commander wasn't a believer in inspections until then. In the past he

had felt that inspections like these were a senior commanders attempt to micromanage or to literally spy on subordinate commanders. Now he was a believer. He found out how things were going and if those junior Marines knew what was going on and why. He was also amazed, because after a while, all of those small problems seemed to go away. For excellent units, doing well on inspections is no more than meeting the daily requirements they're faced with. They've been doing what's supposed to have been done all along and they take on inspections in stride.

## **F. THE NUMBERS**

Watch the statistics, but be careful. Functional inspections and reports, IG's, MCDOSSET's, FSMAO's, SMAT's,<sup>4</sup> and commodity inspections provide good objective views into specific areas. Their results are good indicators of the specific areas which they evaluate. But the thought that--statistics can be made to say whatever you like--is prevalent. Many commanders feel that you can't look just at the numbers and get an overall indicator of a unit. A lot of work may go into making those statistics say good things, but they don't tell the commander about many other essential elements of excellence that are not quantitatively measured. A regimental commander commented, "Objective inspection results are weighed subjectively. If a unit has had the time to prepare then they should be ready. If they weren't given the time to prepare, I think that most commanders make subjective corrections on their own for the given circumstances. An excellent unit will be prepared, regardless of the circumstances because like it or not, inspections are a fact of life that must be dealt with."

Inspections are a fact of life and good or bad, beneficial or a waste of time, the challenges they present are met by excellent units. Although the results are important and often the most visible evidence of the effort put into an inspection, they are not the sole indicator. Commanders realize the importance of quantitative results, but not at the exclusion of subjective opinions. The Marine Corps has laid out requirements that are well known, realistic and often well tested. They provide measureable levels of achievement for organizations to aspire to, and achieve. Commanders want to know how well their units meet the criteria the Marine Corps sets forth, be it an IG or MCCRES<sup>5</sup>. Excellent units aspire to excellence in meeting these challenges.

## **G. PROFESSIONALS TALK LOGISTICS**

"The battalion that is logistically sound, dramatically increases the overall balance of the organization. You can't say you are operationally oriented, because without material care, within two weeks the vehicles are on the deadline, the machineguns and mortars don't work, supplies are running short, and operations come to a screeching halt!" That observation from a general officer was echoed by many. Supply discipline, good maintenance programs, strong supportive commodities, and other logistical aspects of the battalion are large and essential elements of the balanced excellence equation. Excellent outfits enhance these areas on a continuous basis. They balance operational tempo with other readiness requirements, such as maintenance of equipment.

As you might expect, excellence in this regard starts at the top. One regimental commander noted, "There seems to be more selectivity on the

part of the Commanding Generals to look for commanders that don't have an Achilles' heel in the logistics and administrative areas." In stressing the importance logistics commands from senior leadership, another regimental commander added, "Nobody's going to jail for screwing up tactics on a training exercise, but drop the ball on maintenance of gear and that's a fatal wound. That's the unfun, unpopular part of being a commander, but it's probably the most important, and by God, the commander better do it!" One officer, who served a tour with an inspector generals' office, summarized his past observations as to the priority attention given to logistics and maintenance, by excellent organizations. "The fact their commodity areas are good is not simply due to good people, but that someone is providing inspiration in that area. A good commander gets out into the maintenance and supply areas and looks at the equipment. He dignifies the efforts of his men by doing so. When he puts on a pair of coveralls and crawls under a jeep with a mechanic, he sends a gigantic signal to the entire motorpool that what they do counts! From then on, that Marine will bust his butt even more for the commander, and the unit!"

A colonel related to us how a former Commandant of the Marine Corps assessed the situation, "When Marines get together to talk about warfighting, the amateurs talk about tactics--the professionals talk about logistics."

## **H. NON-ZERO DEFECTS**

Excellence requires an environment in which men are not fearful their careers will end because of an honest mistake. An excellent organization ensures that a "zero defects" environment does not exist within the unit.

Negligent and repeated mistakes are not condoned. But, young officers and NCO's are given the freedom to fail--to try things out--and to learn and grow from their mistakes. They are delegated authority to do their jobs and given increasing responsibility as they grow. The atmosphere in the excellent battalion gives all leaders the opportunity to do things the way they see it, and to use initiative and imagination. They're also not afraid to be corrected. Marine leaders in excellent outfits aren't looking over their shoulders--they are looking forward and watching out for their men. Devoid of this environment, the organization cannot grow and will be dead in the water. One colonel echoed the feelings of others when he said, "A zero defects approach is unrealistic. Young leaders will make mistakes and the good ones will learn from them. Given the opportunity to use their initiative, without fear of getting burned if they err, they will do wondrous things. They are the future of our Corps, and unless they are provided an environment in which they can work and grow, they will not develop the skills and tactics that will carry us into the 21st century. It's as simple as that!"

## **I. THE CYCLE**

So how can one battalion be superior to another? A number of factors immediately come to mind--the commander, his staff, the SNCO's, and the troops--they all have a direct and obvious effect on the success of a unit. But what about the cycle of a unit? How is excellence affected by an outfit's position in the unit deployment rotation cycle?

On any given day, a unit is either preparing for deployment or on deployment. Its ability to "be excellent" is dependent upon its position in the deployment cycle. To compare two battalions within the same regiment may

even be unrealistic and unfair to the unit and its Marines. In general we found a unit to be at its highest state of readiness just prior to or immediately upon return from its 6 month deployment. Units tend to undergo a period of massive transformation during the months that follow a deployment, which we heard characterized as "organizational or personnel turbulence." The severity of this turbulence can range from the turnover of a few Marines to in some cases, upwards of 50% - 60% of a units manpower. After a unit undergoes this organizational turbulence it must at some point begin gearing up for the next deployment. Somewhere along this path, the unit picks up the learning curve. The point at which it meets the learning curve is dependent upon many factors already mentioned; the commander, his staff, the SNCO's, the troops, and the degree to which the unit has been affected by the organizational turbulence.

When we asked senior commanders to tell us about their excellent units, their descriptions were prefaced with some version of what has been described. In many cases, their excellent units were the ones that were further along the learning curve and they were often just about to deploy or just returning. Those units have had the opportunity to train and to excell--they were also further along in the cycle. To compare battalions requires an understanding of the deployment cycle and where each unit stands in the cycle. We were told that to take a snapshot, and at that moment in time say that 1st Battalion is excellent and 2nd Battalion is not, may be unrealistic and unfair. You've got to look where they are in the cycle and how well they move along the learning curve.

## **J. NOT WHY? BUT AYE, AYE!**

An excellent unit does what has to be done. It's an organization that meets challenges head on, hunkers down and does what it must to complete the task. "A Marine unit is like a pin cushion", an assistant division commander (ADC) told us, with everyone sticking a requirement pin into it until it's bristling with pins coming from every direction. Many of these pins distract a unit and may cause it to lose sight of its primary mission. Excellent outfits minimize these distractions and never lose sight of the main objective. They take on these additional requirements in an even flow rather than employ "crisis management" each time an unexpected task is handed to them. An excellent outfit responds to that short-fused task or unexpected commitment by accepting it, even though already burdened. They'll look for ways to get something out of it rather than look for ways to get out of it. They know that surprises are a way of life and they will find a way to incorporate them into their training and derive some good. An excellent unit will not respond to the bristling pins with "why us", but rather with a resounding "Aye, Aye!"

### **III. IT STARTS AT THE TOP**

#### **A. THE COMMANDER--LINCHPIN TO SUCCESS**

Almost universally, the officers and men we talked to cited the commander as the critical element to the level of excellence attained by the battalion. On the surface, this may seem to be quite obvious, however many of the officers interviewed went to great lengths to explain the importance of having an excellent officer in command. Not only is the commander responsible for the successes and failures of the unit by virtue of command, he is also seen as the linchpin to their success.

In the excellent battalion, the commander sets the pace and direction for his unit. You really can't get it from anyone else, we were told, as all the Marines in the outfit look to him and him alone, to provide it. Excellence requires that he be the one to translate the direction of higher headquarters into workable, meaningful, and manageable goals for the unit. As a young staff sergeant saw it, "I've come to the realization that the battalion commander really does have an effect on the unit, down to the most junior private. He has great impact on the morale of the troops, how they feel about themselves and about the unit. The officers, SNCO's and troops look to him and want to do things well for him."

Excellent battalions have an excellent leader. That fact was made quite clear by the senior officers we interviewed. As one general stated, "When we're talking about a truly superior battalion, there is usually a truly superior leader. You are simply not going to have an excellent battalion unless the leader is truly superior." A regimental commander described his

view of the importance of the commander by stating, "I'm convinced that if you took all 27 infantry battalions, threw them in the air and they bounced once, the one that bounced the highest would be the one with the best, most dynamic commander." He asserted that the average ability of the battalion staffs and company commanders was relatively equal within the Marine Corps, and the biggest difference was in the ability of the commander. As one general put it, "Normally the battalion will go as far as the commander leads them. I really can't emphasize enough the importance of having a good man in charge, because he has so much influence on it!" His sentiment was echoed by many other senior officers.

Would it be possible to have an excellent battalion without the commander being excellent? It's possible, but not probable. It would take a unit with another informal leader, supported by a superlative staff and good companies, stepping up to provide direction and leadership for the battalion. One senior officer stated that was the circumstance in a battalion in which he had served, "It was a situation in which the operations officer was very strong and he held things together. Those were unusual circumstances but I felt that we still had an excellent unit. That operations officer, by the way, eventually made three stars!" We were reminded by several officers that the battalion commander that operates in that mode is not commanding, and that a level of excellence could not be maintained for long under those circumstances without an excellent commander. He is too key a link and the chain would eventually break. He would eventually contaminate the flavor of the unit.

There is a "flip-side" to this situation--the commander who is too strong. As the involved regimental commander told it, "I had a commander

that was a one man show. He had a great unit. They could do it all and did well across the board. He was unique--at it 29 hours a day! This particular leader was such a driving force, so thorough and read-up on his job that it flowed to the staff and they naturally did well too. In my mind he was the best battalion commander in the division. Not many men could keep up his pace. It was difficult to tell if he had any weak subordinates, however he ran the risk of not developing them. Personally, I believe in giving subordinates as much rope as they need, or it could hurt them and the unit in the long run."

A general summed it up by saying, "A unit has a persona of its own--it's a living organism. It's influenced by the commander to a greater or lesser degree depending upon who is commanding. It's either influenced positively or negatively by him. If he is a good commander the battalion will improve. If he is poor, the battalion will degenerate. If he is mediocre, the battalion will continue unabated without influence from him. Things that were bad will remain bad."

What then, does the excellent commander do to lead his unit to excellence? We asked, and were told in some detail.

## **B. BE READY TO FIGHT**

"You can't go wrong in setting priorities if you keep the mission in mind at all times--to locate, close with and destroy the enemy through fire and maneuver", a general told us. A division staff officer echoed, "The commander must establish in the minds of his men the reason for which the unit exists. In my mind that is to prepare to go to war. All that we do should have this as its end--being prepared. All Marines in the organization can

assist one another and ensure that the spirit of that message is carried out. It becomes an ethical code within the unit." The focus on mission was considered to be a required ingredient to excellence. We have reserved a separate chapter to relay the feelings on that subject in sufficient detail.

### **C. ORCHESTRATES THE MOVEMENT**

"It's remarkable", related one commander, "what one person can do in a unit for good or bad. You can take excellent musicians, and if the man at the top frustrates them, or doesn't have them operating in harmony, the orchestra doesn't play very well. But you can have an orchestra that isn't too talented and the right leader can somehow get them to play some pretty good melodies. It really gets down to leadership." Guidance and direction from the top provides the "music" which enables an outfit to perform, together, as a team. Publication of the same sheets of music throughout an organization is what helps keep them in tune.

The commander is the director and coordinator of his unit's effort. He provides the organization with direction through the establishment of realistic objectives. He builds a feeling of unity so that all elements operate in harmony to achieve those goals. A general stated, "Everyone needs to know the direction the unit is going. There has got to be an organized approach. It's more than just the battalion commander jumping on his horse and saying 'follow me!'" A first sergeant echoed, "The battalion commander sets the right frame of mind for the battalion, and provides guidance. By doing so he picks up the morale and esprit of the troops and gets everyone operating as a team."

Direction is a starting point but is by no means the only ingredient required to establish excellence. The commanders of excellent battalions plan the destiny of their unit. They make things happen--they don't wing it a day at a time. They maintain a proactive mode, vice reactive, by planning well in advance of execution. They look down the road as far as possible to anticipate and plan for contingencies. The battalion doesn't become overwhelmed by the things they are currently doing--things being emphasized today were planned for. One officer stated his requirement in this regard, "I look to see that the commander projects 6 - 12 months ahead, anticipates problems, and keeps his unit moving forward on an even, steady keel!"

Battalions are often asked to do so much that somethings are bound not to be done as well as the commander would have liked. Excellent units, however, get all tasks accomplished successfully, because their commander sets proper priorities. It gets back to the balanced excellence which excellent outfits strive to achieve. All performances may not be outstanding, but they will be that unit's best effort given the resources and time available. Call it proper planning, strategy formulation, or a bias for getting things done, all excellent commanders and their units do it! One officer summed it up nicely, "The excellent battalions look into the future and control their own destiny by planning for it. Organizations don't fail because they are given too much to do, they fail because they don't look far enough into the future to expand their planning horizons."

#### **D. ELIMINATES THE RATTLES**

Achieving balanced excellence means rounding out the rough edges within the outfit. Excellent commanders hone out the rough spots by capitalizing on the strengths of their unit and men, and focus the effort of their unit to work on perceived weaknesses. As one general officer forcefully stated, "Excellent battalions are consistent across the board. You see the same level of competency regardless of the environment or mission statement. They are balanced because they have been continuously playing to their weaknesses! They have been making training opportunities to round out the battalion, be it to improve in desert or cold weather training or to increase administrative efficiency."

Another officer described this process in a bit more basic terms, "I like a commander who goes in there, shakes that unit a little, sees where it rattles, and then proceeds to work eliminating the rattles. The shaking may be imperceptible, or it might take out windows, it depends on the commander and the situation at hand." An excellent unit isn't boasting of their successes, they are busy working to eliminate any "rattles" their commander may have heard!

#### **E. THE ESSENCE OF COMMAND**

Command style is as varied as the personality of the men who command, and the situations that confront them. However, the senior officers we spoke with specified several considerations as essential elements of an excellent leader.

## 1. A Team Player . . .

Excellent units are supportive of higher headquarters--they're "team players". No matter what they are tasked with, they take assignments as an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. We were told that this supportive attitude flows down through the battalion from the man at the top, and results in good, positive working relationships between the battalion staff and their counterparts at higher headquarters. The message relayed to us was that the excellent unit is able to set its priorities and plot its own course, within the guidance provided by higher command. As one general succinctly stated, "They always maintain sight of the higher headquarters goals."

Inevitably, battalion and higher headquarters goals may differ, particularly when faced with short-fused taskings. When confronted by this dilemma, the excellent battalion seeks a way to be supportive, complete the task and still realize some internal benefit--despite the disruption. It might cause a slight deviation from their original direction of march, but they will find a way to benefit and achieve an intermediate objective. A particularly good example was given by one officer. "I recall one occasion when I was commanding 1/5. We were suddenly tasked by Division to provide a company sized, static display for some command visitors. It was disruptive on our training. However, we approached it from the viewpoint that the Division had chosen us to be an example of what the Marine Corps produces. We then took on that task as a high priority objective. When the time and effort was applied and we explained to the troops why we were doing it, the desired results were achieved. Consequently it reflected favorably on our unit and helped build unit pride in the process. A common trait I have seen in both

successful units and people, is a personal and collective initiative to do whatever is assigned to the best of their ability. It's a professional pride and intensity that says I'm going to do the best I possibly can, given the surrounding circumstances. This attitude is necessary for excellence!"

## 2. ... but has the Courage of His Convictions

An excellent commander runs his battalion in the manner he feels is best, regardless of the impact. He isn't overly concerned with his own fitness report to the degree that he is constantly looking over his shoulder. "He is not concerned with what he looks like, he just goes out and does the job", is the type of comment we frequently heard. He is a man of convictions--a "gutsy guy" as some officers termed it. He is the type of individual that tells seniors how things are, not what he thinks the boss wants to hear. He isn't afraid to convince superiors to take some of the requirements off his units' back, if that is what he feels is needed. He never sacrifices his integrity and is willing to admit when he has made a mistake. He is a man you can believe in. He has the courage of his convictions to make the tough decisions and push his unit when it needs to be pushed. It's a requisite to command Marines. An excellent commander does things right--does the right things--and does them for the right reasons.

A colonel summed up what a number of officers told us when he stated, "An excellent commander does the things he knows in his heart should be done, even if it makes waves, hurts feelings, or places him on the skyline. As much as possible, he strikes a balance between what the book calls for and what he feels is required for the welfare of his unit. He is concerned with being good, not necessarily looking good. It's a balance between the

book, common sense, and feeling for people. It's the vibrancy we call command."

### 3. Take Care of Your Men

"In setting priorities you must look at the requirements and accept the fact that you prioritize according to the mission of the unit. However, the care and welfare of the men must be tied to that", a general told us. An excellent commander, striving to achieve excellence in his unit, knows that he cannot accomplish it alone. The welfare and morale of his Marines is a material consideration reflected in all the unit attempts to achieve, and he considers their welfare a key component of any course he lays. Yes, the mission does come first, but the welfare of his men goes part and parcel with it in the excellent organizations. As one staff sergeant described it, "Excellent units realize that accomplishing the mission is the first priority. However, they also realize there is nothing that says they can't also consider the welfare of the men and accomplish the mission!"

The message from those we spoke with is clear--excellence requires attendance to both the mission and to the welfare of the men. One officer put it in a nutshell, "Accomplish your mission, know your men and take care of their welfare!"

### 4. Bend, but don't Break

Another thing we were told about the priorities and goals within an excellent organization--they're flexible. It was emphasized by many that the commander and his unit must be ready and able to change course rapidly, and smartly. They must be able to change direction midway; they will be

required to do so in combat. At times, it may be external requirements which force a redirection. The excellent outfits "assume those assignments in stride, exhibiting a quiet confidence, without flailing about" observed a regimental commander.

Flexibility is both an attitude instilled in a unit, and a capability achieved through planning and practice. Another officer related what he expected in this regard, "I look to see if the commander is looking at the requirements and resetting priorities when needed because of unexpected events." A general stated his view on how to achieve flexibility. "The excellent commander tests the spontaneity of his unit! He conducts spot checks, performs unit flyaway exercises, and calls out his companies for unexpected operations. He realizes that many of the indicators we have are too predetermined, and in combat things won't happen in a preset manner. The Marine Corps Manual gives the commander the ability to do those things he deems necessary to effectively train and 'ready' his unit. The good ones take advantage of this to engrain flexibility into their organizations."

At times a commander may be able to sense a change in wind direction, and anticipate a required course adjustment--reading the tea leaves as they say. Regardless, excellent commanders don't get locked into one set of priorities. Excellence requires the ability to assume, and successfully accomplish last minute taskings without loss of momentum. We were told that excellent battalions take on those challenges, and get on to the next one.

## 5. Be Yourself

You can't fool the troops! We've all heard it before, and the senior officers we interviewed reminded us of it again. An excellent commander is

sincere in every endeavor. He is sincere in his efforts to take care of his men, and in leading them. The basis for sincerity on the part of the commander lies in his own personality. He acts within that personality--he is himself. Attempts to do otherwise will be met with failure. A colonel asserted, "... good leaders are who they are, they don't create an image. They don't put on one face for the commanding general and another for the troops. Sooner or later they will lose their identity, and with it their credibility."

A number of officers referred to some of the legendary figures of our Corps and their leadership qualities. We as leaders can learn from them, but we would error gravely by trying to imitate them. As one general advised, "You get where you are by working at improving yourself and developing your own personality. Learn from others, but develop your own personality. Anyone that tries to command by acting like a commander, rather than being one, is doomed to failure." Echoed another officer, "... you can learn from other people but you can't be other people. A commander has to work within his personality structure. If a man is John Wayne, then he should go out and be John Wayne. If he is Wally Cox, then he should go out and be Wally Cox--if he tries to be John Wayne, the troops will pick up on it and won't follow him to the nearest head!"

## 6. Be out in Front

Lead by example--be out in front! "It may be a commonly used and old phrase, but it is something most aspire to but seldom reach", asserted one colonel. You can have all the knowledge, personality and teaching ability in the world, but that won't carry you unless your men see you are able and

willing to do it with them, whatever the task. The troops must know their commander is a soldier and that no matter what mode he operates in, he has their best interests at heart, and will go the distance with them in combat--and bring them back. Added another former commander, "Excellent commanders go forward to see what's going on, they don't sit back and wait for the reports to come in."

#### 7. Risk taker, not a Gambler

Excellent commanders are not afraid to take risks when it is required in order to "do the right thing". He has confidence in himself and in his unit to do so. This is not to say he gambles. As one former commander explained, "He doesn't just throw the ball in the air and where it lands is what he takes! Risk is something the commander can control--it is calculated and thought out."

#### 8. See and be Seen

Management by walking around, out and about, or command presence. Give it whatever label you like, we heard them all. The message was clear from senior officers--all excellent commanders get out to see what's going on. "It's as important for the men to see the commander, as it is for the commander to see them", one general stated. It is part of doing business, providing both a presence, and edification for the commander. It is accomplished by some officers through weekly inspections or on a more informal basis by "just grabbing the sergeant major and going to where the troops are to watch them do their thing", as one officer suggested. Regardless, the payoff to both the commander and his men is immeasurable.

One colonel provided a recommendation that we feel is applicable to all leaders. "A leader has to be actively engaged in the activities of his unit. He gets down there and provides them with his presence. I went to visit a unit one day and ran into the executive officer. I asked for the CO (commanding officer) and was told he was down at the motor pool. When I got down there, I found him under a damn vehicle with a mechanic. I don't have to tell you what that means to the troops. You don't even have to say anything, you just have to be there--they appreciate that!"

#### 9. Take the 6th Step.

Supervision is required--micromanagement not desired! In excellent battalions, commanders supervise sufficiently to ensure subordinates do their job in the general direction he has set out. They give subordinates the latitude to operate, and offer constructive feedback on how well they are performing. When providing guidance, they specify what needs to be done--not how to do it. It's a criteria for excellence--to allow subordinates to carry out their responsibilities in a manner they see fit. A former division commander observed, "A leader has to trust his subordinates and allow them to do their jobs. He must supervise to ensure that they do the job in the general direction he has set forth. It's supervision, not micromanagement. It's the troop leading steps, particularly the last one. The good leader finds a balance between over supervising and not supervising. I don't know if anyone ever masters it, but the good ones continually work at it." A regimental commander added, "It's tough to learn how to lay back and let your subordinates do what they do best. You've got to let them free to enjoy what they are doing."

We were reminded that this applies down the chain of command within excellent organizations. One SNCO stated what some others had also observed, "Excellent leaders follow through and supervise. It's like in basketball--once the ball is shot, if you miss, you follow up, rebound and shoot until you score."

#### 10. Father to Son, Teacher to Pupil

Be instructive! It's something that was sounded loud and clear by senior officers discussing excellence in command. The commander is a teacher for his staff and subordinate commanders. His ability to convey his knowledge, experience, and professionalism to them is essential. It's required that he get his message across and develop his juniors. It's not just good advice, it's a responsibility. "It's a father-son, teacher-pupil relationship", as several officers described it. "He should be a combination cheerleader and father figure. The commander is obligated to pass on what he knows and to teach what he has gained over the years. That's why he is the commander--to imbue his expertise to others."

Portraying this role with a slightly different view, one general stated, "The commander is the expert. Having already seen some of the minefields that are out there, he must advise his subordinates as to their location and their associated hazards. He provides a map, charting those minefields and lets them know how to avoid them." Excellent commanders assume this responsibility and employ every method available to pass on their knowledge be it teaching one-on-one, to encouraging professional reading--from improving writing skills to tactical competency. Another general reflected, "A leaders responsibility, at any level, requires that he be a teacher. As a

leader, the majority of your time should be used teaching, evaluating, correcting, and passing along your knowledge!"

## **F. IT'S BASIC LEADERSHIP**

"The leadership philosophy has changed over the years", a regimental commander told us, "it used to be one of negative leadership, meaning--'you do this or else this will happen'. There's still some of that around today, but today's Marine doesn't necessarily respond to that. You have to handle Marines differently than you did 15 or 20 years ago--therein lies the challenge. The leader, no matter what the level, to be successful, has to be more aware of the personal issues that make people go. To be a battalion commander today requires a heck of a lot more than it did years ago. The troops are smarter, more aware of what's going on, and have a greater need for challenge."

There was a lot said concerning the leadership challenge confronting commanders today, particularly when it comes to leading young Marines. Most told us that it required a flexible response that depended upon the situation at hand. But the common thread throughout was to emphasize the positive. There was no waivering on discipline--always firm, fair, swift, and consistent. It's not an issue. As one general put it, "there are always times when a pat on the back is required, but there are also times for a kick in the ass!" However, the bottom line read, an excellent unit provides positive feedback to those who perform well within the unit--incentives, attaboys--whatever. Men need to be recognized for the good things they do. Positive reinforcement, not negative leadership. Highlight the 95% of the effort they did well rather than the 5% that was a miss."

Just how important is positive leadership to excellence? It's importance was stated by most of the officers and men we spoke with during the course of our research, and it was more or less implied by the others. We found that its influence can be long lasting. We feel one division staff officer summed up the importance of the commander, his influence on the unit, and his role in taking an organization to excellence. He told us about an outfit in which he had served as a young lieutenant. He spoke of leadership, and the lasting affect proper leadership from the top can have. "I come from the Leftwich<sup>9</sup> school of leadership. In Vietnam, he was my battalion commander and he taught me a lot as a young second lieutenant. You lead by example and command from the ground where the troops are. You deal with a lot of personalities as a leader and you must get the most out of all of them. Accentuating the positive helps greatly to do that. As a commander you never really jam a man for an honest mistake. You correct him, positively, and point out things that he should have considered along the way. It's positive leadership. It develops the man and at the same time helps make commanding easier. Leftwich was a good Marine and he left a good example. Several of my contemporaries and I are still in the Marine Corps because of him and the leadership he provided. He is the type of leader, that if you didn't know him but saw him in the shower, you'd automatically address him as 'Sir!'"

## **IV. FOCUS ON THE MISSION**

### **A. PROPER SIGHT PICTURE**

"The measure of a good unit in combat is accomplishing the mission with minimum casualties and maximum hurt on the enemy" is how one ADC called it. He added that what excellent outfits do in garrison in peacetime translates into good performance in combat. They concentrate on things that are important to that success. We were reminded by a number of officers the ability to accomplish the mission in combat is the major criteria for excellence. It is the true measure of excellence. Since that test is not often undertaken by units in peacetime, their "ability" to do well in combat is a subjective assessment applied by those senior Marines we spoke with.

In the peacetime scenario, tasks conducive to the accomplishment of the "ultimate mission" are given the highest priority in excellent units. One division staff officer reflected what was heard from many others, "My criteria for excellence is whether the battalion can do those things inherent in their mission. In an excellent battalion, the commanders direction for the unit is clear to all and says 'we will do everything well'. Mission related tasks, however, are given the highest priority. This must be done!" Preparation to go to war tomorrow, is the number one priority. The mission is the focus of the excellent battalion.

### **B. NOT WRAPPED AROUND THE "IN-OUT BASKET"**

An excellent organization streamlines things in garrison to the degree that enables them to get into the field and train--often. We were told they

efficiently cut through administrative requirements and don't get wrapped around the "in-out basket."

The bible of the daily routine within the excellent unit is the training schedule--they follow it and live by it. The troops know their appointed place of duty and are on time. Training is not only scheduled, it is executed. Senior officers noted that you can look at an excellent battalions' training schedule and go to the field and expect to see the training being conducted as per the plan. One former ADC stated that if he went out to a machinegun shoot for example, he would find the ammo there, the range squared-away, and the rounds hitting the targets--on time.

The success of the excellent battalion is really no secret. Training is simply a high priority of the commander. Consequently, the staff ensures outside support needed for training is requested well in advance, and internal logistical support is provided. We were told the excellent battalion rarely experiences last minute cancellations or disruptions of their training because of delays or nonavailability of required support. Marines in excellent organizations don't hurry up and wait when they go to the field, they train! A number of junior Marines stated that excellent units provide cross training for their men. They provide training on basic infantry skills for all Marines, to include the non-infantry types. It's only fair--they need to know it, and certainly get tested on those things at promotion boards. They also told us that the CYA approach of signing rosters for training never conducted--just to look good on inspections--was not done in the good outfits in which they had served. Additionally, military occupational specialty (MOS) training is not only scheduled, it's conducted properly, with the NCO's participating in the teaching process. Being an effective

instructor is a requirement for an NCO, they emphasized, and excellent organizations allow them to develop their skills.

### **C. BUILD UPON THE BASICS**

"A professional is one who learns and knows the basic tenants of the job. If he knows the tenants and violates one of them knowingly in the course of operations, then that might equate to a strategy. If he doesn't know the basic tenants and violates one, then that's suicide!" That's how a former regimental commander described the importance of knowing the basics. Taken from the perspective of the battalion, senior officers told us this equates to ensuring small units are effectively trained and individual skills are sharpened. They acknowledged that many requirements compete for the time needed to effectively train at the small unit level, but at the same time emphasized the importance of making that time available. In the view of many, forces outside the battalion impinge upon the time to train to a significant degree, but the excellent outfits, nonetheless get it done.

When evaluating a battalion in the field, most of the officers stated that they looked for the ability of the unit to do the basics. How does the individual Marine move--is his gear secured to minimize noise--helmet snapped--weapon and gear cared for? How do the fire teams, squads and platoons move--is dispersion maintained--how are they controlled by their leaders? How are their bivouacs set up--how do the companies function? Where do they set in gun positions, establish security, set up a defense and use terrain? These are the things they told us they keyed on, not some complicated strategy.

Excellent battalions balance things so that small unit training is conducted. They look beyond the horizon, but not at the expense of the basics. They view their small units and the basics as the foundation upon which excellence is built. It's the point of departure for their future successes operating as a battalion. A former regimental commander described his views of training to go to war, as focusing on training squads and fire teams to fight--while seeing to it that the staff ensures the equipment is ready in support. He noted that commanders of excellent units make training time available by avoiding complicated and expensive field exercises until the small units are properly trained.

#### **D. HOW MUCH TIME?**

The appropriate amount of time which should be accorded training is a subjective determination on the part of the commander. However a former regimental and battalion commander provided this view. "I place a lot of emphasis on individual training. It's criminal to have a Marine who doesn't know how to use his weapon effectively, and I don't just mean punching holes in a target. Fifty percent of my training schedule was devoted to the individual Marine--he's got to be able to do it!" Excellent battalions do whatever is necessary to ensure their Marines and small units are competent in infantry skills. One regimental commander noted that an intense, predetermined training schedule must be set within battalions preparing for deployment. However, since Marines are joined in the battalion at various stages of training, the unit can't afford to get away from training in squad and fire team tactics. He provided this example. "When a battalion of mine was recently getting ready for deployment, they had a good schedule of

routinely working with the Navy on executing the landing plan of the MAU (Marine Amphibious Unit). However, when the battalion went on leave just prior to deployment, they kept a cadre unit back to run a refresher course for fifty Marines they had just joined." He asserted that this not only ensured "triggerpullers" were trained, but added to unit cohesion, by seeing to it that those men were properly received into the battalion.

The junior Marines we spoke with also emphasized the importance of small units being effectively trained. They stated that excellent battalions not only see to it that small unit training is accomplished, they also provide NCO's the authority and time to train their men. The NCO's are allowed to develop their instructional and leadership skills and ultimately become more competent small unit leaders as a result. As one NCO told us, "I've been in companies where every month the company commander would meet with the NCO's and discuss the type of training we wanted to accomplish the next month. We not only scheduled it for the platoon, but a 'platoon sergeants time' was also scheduled. During that time our platoon sergeant would let us work as squads and fire teams. It was the small unit leaders chance to shine--and it really worked!" We could sense the appreciation he felt towards those companies and towards the battalions. As an NCO, he not only was responsible for the training of his men, but was also given the time and support needed to do so.

One ADC stated that while the CAX (combined arms exercise) and MCCRES exercises are good evaluation programs and great training opportunities, it still comes down to the basics. He remarked, "A unit must get into the basics in order to do them well." His advice, "Forget the rope bridge building and rappelling if you can't lay a base of fire!"

## **E. CHALLENGING AND REALISTIC**

We heard that one of the keys to successful training in the excellent battalions is the vitality and dynamics of their program. They provide the type of training Marines join the Corps to do--realistic and hard. They're continually looking for ways to enhance and improve their training, to make it more innovative and challenging. Senior officer discussed the importance of providing this type of training, while noting the devastating affect not doing so has on lesser units. As one colonel described it, "In an infantry battalion you must get all Marines to feel they are better than everyone else, the best unit going! They may not be, but if they feel it, they will still be a damn good unit. To make them feel that way means tough, demanding training, where they can see that what they are doing is harder than the units to their left and right. They're marched harder, farther, and more often--they're in the field more, they do more night training and they're inspected in garrison more often too. It builds inherent discipline, the type that carries Marines through when the going gets tough--it's key!"

Morale, esprit, self-confidence, unit effectiveness--you name it and it's positively influenced by the excellent outfit through realistic and challenging training. No one stressed this more than the young Marines we spoke with. They expect to be challenged and tested, be it strenuous physical training--long, hard training in the field--or tough, thorough, meaningful inspections. They told us, "Excellent units work hard, they do a lot of demanding stuff--train hard, PT hard--and they don't sit around!"

A young corporal told us, "Excellent units are competitive in their unit training. They don't go out to fight an imaginary enemy. Aggressors are out there opposing them and at times using real enemy tactics!" A number of

young Marines cited training with live ammunition as a way excellent units really get their attention and make training realistic. In this regard, it takes a bit of a risk taker as a commander, we were reminded. As one colonel saw it, "It takes a commander that goes out on a limb a little bit to ensure that his men train the way they are going to fight, and by that I mean giving them a chance to train with live ammunition." He added that the commander who is concerned more with his own career than with ensuring his unit is ready to fight, probably doesn't give his men a chance to experience and learn through realistic training. Excellent commanders, building excellent battalions do!

The use of MILES<sup>7</sup> equipment in training to significantly add realism was an area addressed by junior enlisted Marines. Excellent units, they feel, utilize it as much as possible. To say they enjoy using it, and get a lot out of the training it provides would be an understatement! One sergeant told us what many others echoed. "MILES gear is very good for accomplishing realism. It gives me the sense that 'Yeah, I really can get shot!' You really have to think about your actions. You can't just go into the field and be like John Wayne. The feeling that, 'If this were a real situation, I would be dead', makes the training real. Training this way keeps the thought of combat in your mind on a day-to-day basis. Things you do daily become more closely related to the mission. You begin to think, 'I really don't mind running these three miles, because if I were a bit quicker, maybe I wouldn't have gotten shot the other day!'"

Excellent battalions periodically call out their units unannounced, with attachments, to exercise as if they were reacting to a real world contingency. We were told these evolutions not only serve to ensure Marines

are physically ready, but that they are also mentally prepared to go. One division staff officer stressed that a commander has a responsibility not only to physically train his battalion, but to instill a sense of readiness and desire in his men to do what they have been trained to do should the occasion arise. He told us this instilled confidence is a result of the troops knowing they have been trained. They know their equipment is ready, and that they are ready--in body and mind. They share a general feeling that they will do well in combat. "The commander must know his men are ready and anxious to go--it's important in our business", he added, "not that they be a bunch of war-mongers, but that they're not a bunch of pussycats either." He cited as an example, of how a battalion in which he had served got a measure of the mettle of their men when they tested the unit recall procedures one evening. "We tried to make to make it as realistic as possible--and we succeeded. When the troops saw the officers drawing weapons from the armory, and equipment from supply being loaded on trucks, they were thoroughly convinced we were going someplace. The thing that inspired me however, was that nobody asked where we were going--it just didn't matter. The point was, we were going someplace! It was great! An attitude like this, I associate with excellence."

#### **F. THEY KNOW WHAT THEY DID**

Excellent battalions and their subordinate units accomplish what they intended from their training. Training evolutions and their goals are thought out well in advance by the unit leaders. They know precisely what they are going to do before they get to the field. They have a plan, "something you can get your arms around" asserted one former ADC. He added that if it is a

company in the field, "the company commander should be able to express in terms of outcomes, what he expects his Marines to learn from the training, and how he plans to test to see if in fact they have learned." In the view of one current regimental commander, "An excellent unit is one that returns from the field knowing that it accomplished what it set out to do--not one that returns and has to assess what the hell it did when it was out there!"

## **G. THEY ALWAYS HIT THEIR MARK**

"Excellent units don't just try hard, they do it. They achieve their measure of success", stated a regimental commander. Yes, an excellent battalion is balanced, proficient, spirited, well-trained, and properly lead. But their most distinguishable characteristic seen by those outside the outfit, are the positive results they attain. They react and respond positively. They habitually ensure that the small details are taken care of--they believe the larger issues will be taken care of by doing so. They are organizations that continually perform to their potential, and do the best they are capable of on all tasks. They don't pick and choose their performances. High quality results, achieved with maximum efficiency and minimum external guidance is the modus operandi of these units. "They're an outfit that does what has to be done. An organization that meets challenges by 'hunkering down' to do what it must to meet the task" as one general explained it. Subsequently they are known for their results, which most times are better than expected.

Excellent battalions aren't necessarily flashy going about their business either. That's not what catches the eye of seniors. A current commander told us he likes a battalion that is aggressive, but quietly so, "one that does

it without a lot of chest pounding, but nonetheless does it with vigor." Excellent organizations gain recognition from those up the chain of command through establishing a reputation for dependability and consistent performance. We found out that "the real subjective measure of a battalion's recognition of excellence is having other Marines say that they are the unit to call if you want anything done, and done correctly!"

## **V. THE MARINE ETHIC**

### **A. SEMPER FI, MAC**

What causes the chill to run down the spine of a leatherneck when the chords of the Marine's Hymn are struck? Why is a man "once a Marine, always a Marine? What gets a man to go that extra mile? It's pride, teamwork, heritage and esprit de corps--it's the Marine ethic. The spirit of just being a Marine is the underlying framework on which a team is built. It's a feeling that all good organizations have. A feeling that comes from inside. It's a feeling that comes from having worked hard together and having suffered together. It also comes from simply sitting in the rain and mud, together, getting cold. It comes from out of the past when you view the portraits and legacies of those men, no different than yourself, who served and fought so proud and valiant, as Marines. A colonel reflected, "In Vietnam, I found that Marines didn't die because they wanted to be heroes, but because they cared for somebody."

An excellent outfit develops strong comradeship--they develop a feeling they are one. They are enthusiastic and possessed with a "can-do" attitude. They're charged up and looking for more to do, not less. They are not satisfied with the way things are and although they realize they are good, they're looking for ways to get better. Be it intramurals, a field exercise, or combat, these outfits don't just come to fight, they come to win.

### **B. THE FAMILY**

"I was conducting a personnel and uniform inspection. As I was inspecting one young Marine, I noticed a wedding band on his finger. 'Marine',

I asked, 'where's your wife?' The young man fidgeted a moment, gestured behind me and said, 'over there, on the hill sir.' I turned and on that little hill, saw a large congregation of wives and children who were observing the inspection. To me, it was an overwhelming display of unit pride and esprit that extended beyond the organization to include the family."

The family adds a new dimension to the phrase "take care of your Marines." Many times we heard emphasis on the word "care." You've got to sincerely show your men that you care, that you're concerned, not only for them, but for the well-being of their families. Good outfits know that a Marines' family is also part of the unit and they schedule "family days" on a regular basis. A former regimental commander related just how important the family is. "You can't forget the families of these young Marines. Family service organizations are extremely important. Good outfits ferret out if a Marine is having troubles at home. Because if he is, I'll tell you, he's going to have trouble at work. There are many more Marines married these days than when I came into the Marine Corps 28 years ago. They need to know that you're concerned about their families and they need to see results of that concern. They need to know that when they deploy, the regiment and the battalion is going to look after their family--it'll make it easier for that kid to do his job."

### **C. FOR THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US**

How important is the heritage of a unit? Do units who have performed to standards of excellence in the past continue to be top running units? Do excellent units keep getting better?

Every officer we spoke with had something to say about the relationship of a unit's past performance--its reputation, its lineage, its heritage--to its ability to be a top running outfit. The thoughts on this subject varied from yes, it's a key factor, to no it doesn't have a role in how well a unit performs. We found that the heritage of a unit is as important as the commander makes it. It can make a difference and it is something that a unit can fall back on. Its effect depends upon how often it is used and most importantly, how much is known by the men. It can foster or become the nucleus of unit pride and esprit, and it can be built upon. Again, there are no right answers to these questions, but they provided stimulus for thought and evoked some very interesting comments from senior Marines who themselves have helped establish a part of Marine Corps history.

We didn't have to look long to find answers to these questions. But before we look at the consensus opinion, here are a few comments. A former ADC and regimental commander told us, "Tradition can make a lasting impression when that young Marine enters the battalion command post and views the citations of past Medal of Honor recipients--it can't help but leave a lasting impression."

Others said: "The heritage of a battalion doesn't play a big part in the excellence of a battalion. Today you can go from riches to rags through a turnover of personnel."

"I feel that the heritage of a unit can play a part of excellence in the battalion today. I had 3/5 for two years and I know how important the heritage of the 5th Marine Regiment was to me and to the Marines in the regiment."

"An astute leader can capitalize on the heritage of a unit, but you have to earn your spurs every day. You can't accept a group of men into an organization and tell them how great it was and expect them to perform. You must also show them how great it is--then you can get them to do anything."

"The heritage of a unit can play a part of excellence in an outfit if the commander uses it to his advantage. For example, when I was the CO of 2/4, we were known as 'The Magnificent Bastards', and we would use that title frequently. It helped motivate and gave us some uniqueness. I found that it helped get us going in some situations and helped us get through some others."

"The heritage or lineage of a unit doesn't have much to do with how good or bad a unit is. It's based upon the people and the leadership in that battalion on that day."

"The association of a unit with its history is important to the unit and to the people in it. Some Marines never want to leave a particular unit and always want to go back to it."

"Heritage is important--carry the torch high--but it doesn't effect the readiness of the unit. It's important, but not overwhelmingly so."

"The heritage of a unit makes a difference. Unfortunately, regiments often become clearinghouses for battalions and much of the importance of heritage is diminished. It's worth the time to refresh our Marines on what their predecessors have done. S. L. A. Marshall in Men Against Fire, asserts that heritage provides a sense of belonging and extends and strengthens unit cohesion. Of all the services, I think the Marine Corps has the proudest traditions and heritage."

"The heritage of a unit is very important, absolutely, it's a self fulfilling prophesy and sometimes it gets you through that 50 kilometer hike. Put on the battle streamers and let the troops know what they mean."

"Heritage does have a role in excellence--but just for so long. If a unit has a reputation for excellence and achieves it, it becomes a self imposed, self perpetuating standard. Heritage and a good reputation does help attract good people, but it doesn't make the unit good by itself."

#### **D. FOR THE NEWLY FORMED**

And for those units who have little or no past on which to draw, "The heritage of a unit provides a tool for the CO to use. It nourishes a sense of belonging if the members are aware of the history. If properly used as a building block, it can add to morale and esprit. It's easy to use in the 5th Marine Regiment for example, but for units like the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Light Assault Vehicle (LAV) Battalions, with no heritage it's a different ball game. The emphasis must be that we are the first and we will establish ourselves--and we'll do one hell of a job!"

#### **E. THE CONSENSUS**

Having heard all of this, we looked a little further and found what we think is the essence of the relationship between a unit, its men, and those who have gone before. The following thoughts of a colonel, we feel, sum up what has been said. "The heritage of a unit means a lot. Just getting through boot camp means a lot--being a Marine means a lot, it's something special. The heritage of a unit is important and a commander should make the history of his unit known to his men. More importantly, however, I feel is the heritage and history of our Marine Corps--that's what should be

stressed. Make the men proud to be Marines and couple that with unit pride. That motivates Marines to fight and stand the test of combat. It's something that is tangible to the Marine everyday."

Another echoed, "Heritage is important if it is used correctly. For example, the 5th Marines is the most decorated regiment in the Marine Corps. As far as individual regiments or battalions go, it means that those units were in the right place at the right time and did one hell of a job--but that's not to say that another Marine outfit could not have done equally as well. Making reference to that at specific times can inspire present members of the command to recognize the fact that those achievements were accomplished by typical, everyday Marines who aspired to excellence--it can have a positive and at times a dramatic effect on a unit. Keep the torch burning--it's part of the Marine ethic and part of our American heritage."

## **VI. AN ENVIRONMENT OF EXCELLENCE**

### **A. WE'RE WINNERS**

Throughout the course of our research, many officers talked about "the atmosphere" that prevades in excellent organizations. We heard comments such as "The atmosphere can tell you a lot about a battalion"--"Excellent battalions possess a good working climate"--"Excellent battalions provide an atmosphere which lets individuals realize the things they came into the Marine Corps for". Though described in different ways, the end product was the same--excellent outfits create a spirited environment in which enthusiastic Marines do their job.

"Marines are competitive by nature and we should encourage this to help achieve excellence. We are not satisfied with being second best--not in an excellent organization", stated a former regimental commander. We were told that the excellent battalions don't think they are the best, they know they are the best! They think of themselves as winners! "It shows in the troops, they are proud to be in the unit and have feeling within themselves that they are excellent", observed one colonel.

An environment of excellence--we are the best, we are winners--is achieved by any number of methods. Several SNCO's observed that sometimes a personal pat on the back from the commander can help, "It really helps the battalion get on the right track if the CO tells them they are the best, whether or not they are, because it gives them that extra push to get over the hill when things get rough. They begin to believe they are excellent and won't settle for less!"

## **B. TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION**

Communication channels within the excellent battalion are clear and open. Most of the Marines we spoke with addressed this point directly. As one general stated, "If the troops know what is expected of them you don't have trouble getting it done. Let the troops know what is going on in advance. You can be flexible and change, but then make sure the troops know you are changing and even why." We were told that in excellent organizations the commander talks to the troops. He takes every opportunity to pass information directly to the men at formations and other opportune occasions. A number of SNCO's cited good communications as a factor which contributes considerably to morale within an excellent outfit. One staff sergeant said, "Communication within the battalion has a big influence on morale--you need good, open communication. The word has to be passed and Marines must know what's expected of them. Better results are achieved because they know what's upcoming and can properly prepare themselves." A corporal confirmed, "Excellent units tell their Marines why they are doing things and the troops understand the purpose of their daily actions. They explain how requirements relate to the mission. The men feel they are a part of the team on a day-to-day basis, working towards a goal." Passing the word enables excellent organizations to achieve what one general described as "a thread of knowledge that runs through a battalion down to the most junior man. You know who you are, where you are going, why you are doing it, and where you are going next."

Communication doesn't just flow down the chain of command, it flows up and is readily accepted. As a former regimental commander saw it, "In an

excellent unit, every Marine is made to feel that he is an important part of the unit. The good ideas in the battalion come from the bottom up, not the top down. The CO should come up with about 2% of the good ideas for running the unit--the other 98% should come from the bottom up." This environment prevents apathy and fosters imaginative, creative thinking. Marines feel that they can make a difference and that people will listen to them and their ideas. Excellent battalions also see to it that originators of good ideas are recognized--credit is given where credit is due.

The quality and caliber of the young Marine today is high, and has never been better. As one officer remarked, "Not only must a lieutenant colonel coming back to the fleet realize that weapons have changed, but the quality of the Marine has also. The old solutions sometimes don't work, and he must expect to be flexible." As another officer noted, "The 'do it because I said so' attitude will work in some situations but may not in others. In war time, the 'why fors' are quite obvious to all, but in today's 'peacetime environment' they may not be quite so obvious. Commanders must be willing and able to explain things to subordinates on occasion. The attitude that 'they do what I say' doesn't always apply." Excellent units are attuned to the better attitudes and greater abilities of today's Marine and they capitalize on it. As a staff sergeant explained, "In an excellent battalion, information is passed through the unit. It's realized that anytime you can give a man information, or answer a question, you are fostering excellence. The one thing troops probably fear the most, is not knowing what's going on. Young troops today have many questions and they want, and need, to know what their unit is doing!"

All the young Marines with whom we spoke addressed the importance of two-way communication. Many spoke of the benefits to morale and unity when their leaders explained the "reasons" and "the big picture" or simply sat back and listened. A division staff officer provided a good example of the power of good communications. "While in Okinawa we had some intensive training setup during a specific period. We had worked hard to get ranges locked on, and company, platoon and squad evolutions setup. The whole nine yards had been planned for several months. Higher headquarters suddenly decided that they wanted to perform a pre-operational logistics inspection during that same time period. They wouldn't change the date of the inspection. We had two options, either cut out the training and concentrate on the inspection, or to work weekends and do both. We ended up working weekends for awhile to accomplish both evolutions, with inspection preparation taking place on the weekends. We did well in both areas, and I attribute that success to the fact that the troops were fully informed of the situation. Sure, there was some initial hemming and hawing, but after they were informed and understood the situation and the options available, they really put out!"

### **C. AGAIN, IT'S TEAMWORK**

A number of officers mentioned that excellence in a battalion requires good people in key billets. However, good people do not guarantee that a battalion will achieve excellence. Often a unit will have some great individuals, but lack that mystique of being a team. Excellent battalions are not usually made up of "superstars", most battalions aren't. What the excellent units possess, is the ability to work together effectively. Marines

work in the billets for which they are trained. The commander and his staff function well together. The SNCO's get along. The companies work together for the betterment of the battalion as a whole and the organization has a spirit of inner support. What excellent units do is to somehow meld individual talents together. One colonel stated what was echoed by others, "Sometimes an excellent unit is the right combination of people and personalities. I've seen units that were technically and tactically proficient that I didn't consider excellent because the people didn't gel. They didn't get along, and there was a lot of discord. An excellent unit is one where the combination of personality and talent meld together so that everything jives. People get together, they strive and pull together for mission accomplishment. Developing these things in a unit comes from the leadership. It's not something that comes from the chance of having good people. I've seen units that had a lot of problems until a new CO came in. With the same people in the battalion, he was able to turn it around with a feeling of unity and caring. There are a lot of things that come into play when you talk about an excellent organization. However, I feel that when you look at what it takes to have a super unit, aside from all the other factors, it's that gelling of personalities that makes it happen."

#### **D. DISCIPLINE--HARD, BUT FAIR**

Excellent battalions have high standards and hold their Marines to those standards. The standards are realistic and achievable--they realize that if you set standards low you won't achieve much. Many stated that the discipline of a unit is set and established in garrison. It's a key characteristic found in good organizations and it helps them to be successful

in the field. Marines, young and old, expect discipline to be hard but fair and consistently applied. The successful battalion is a disciplined outfit. Proper discipline ensures that everyone pulls their load--it's what Marines have come to want and expect. Discipline, combined with high standards, is an integral part of the Marine Corps, and is never compromised.

## **E. LOYALTY GETS LOYALTY**

We heard that the commanders loyalty to the troops gets loyalty in return. We also heard that little things mean a lot in securing their loyalty. "It doesn't take a lot to get a Marine on your side and have good discipline", stated a first sergeant. "He doesn't need a new barracks or anything, all he needs is to be shown that you sincerely care about him. It can be achieved easily--by asking a Marine his name as you tour the area, or by securing the battalion early on friday after a hard battalion run--it's the little things. If the commander shows his concern, it flows down the chain quickly. Everyone wants to feel part of a unit that cares for the welfare of one another. The next thing you know, you have an ass-kicking unit--everyone in it is concerned about the success of the battalion!"

The young Marines also emphasized the simple things. Simple things reward and make young Marines feel appreciated--just an "atta-boy" when they have worked hard means a lot. They like to know that their CO really appreciates what they do, and in the excellent battalions, they somehow know he cares. In excellent units the CO ensures that the unit spends a lot of time together in the field training--doing the Marine things--and he lets them know he is concerned for their welfare. "I remember", a young sergeant related, "a past battalion CO that took us to the field often for really good

training--no matter what time we got back he would have the mess hall open to serve steak and eggs to everyone!"

## **F. WE ENJOY WORKING HERE**

"An excellent battalion enjoys what it is doing and it is obvious they take pride in it", commented one officer. It's a comment we heard numerous times during our research--Marines in excellent battalions enjoy serving in their outfit. It is a function of all the factors the excellent battalion does so well, and culminates with individual enjoyment and satisfaction in doing a damn fine job! To an outsider, it's noticed by the attitude and demeanor displayed by the Marines, as well as in the appearance of their area and equipment. Their satisfaction is something you can sense and feel as you step into their area. As one master sergeant described it, "If you were initially checking into the battalion, the Marines in the various shop sections would help you when you walked in and they'd make you feel welcome. You wouldn't stand in the middle of the office for five minutes and be ignored." He added that this single indicator tells you a lot about the outfit's pride, motivation, and professionalism, and their concern for other Marines--they're things that excellent organizations embrace.

## **G. WE'RE IN THE PEOPLE BUSINESS**

"Taking care of your men leads to success in garrison, in training, and on the battlefield." Taking care of your men is a principle of leadership, and we were told it is a high priority within excellent battalions--right up there with mission accomplishment. Caring starts with the commander, and his concern is reflected by his subordinate leaders. Excellent battalions sense

the feelings of their men and treat them as people, not parts of a big machine. "Excellent battalions realize that unforeseen things will come up with individuals, and the man may need some special consideration to help him resolve a problem", stated a staff sergeant. "Even if they are in the throws of an important inspection, that battalion will accommodate the Marine regardless of whether he's considered a key player or not." Excellent battalions know and believe that not only will the Marine be more effective in the future for it, but other Marines in that outfit will feel better as well, by simply witnessing the concern for the individual shown by the command.

Excellent battalions endeavor to increase the quality of life for their Marines to the best possible level. It's not necessarily the results that are so important, but that the men know someone genuinely cares about them and that the best effort is being put forth on their behalf. As one general stated, "Excellent battalions take care of the needs of the troops. You don't always have to solve the problems, it's often just enough for the Marine to know that his commander is doing his best."

We mentioned that taking care of the total Marine in today's environment includes consideration of his family. Excellent units are particularly aware of this during a unit deployment. They realize how important it is for the Marine to know that someone in the rear will aid his wife should problems occur. They set up wives support groups, coordinate with family services for needed assistance, and send monthly "family grams" to update the Marines' family on battalion accomplishments overseas. They show they care! One colonel summed it for us by saying, "If you're not in the people business, you shouldn't be in the Marine Corps--because that's what it's all about!"

## **VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. CONCLUSIONS**

So there you have it. We developed a picture of excellence in United States Marine Corps infantry battalions, by talking to senior infantry officers who have seen it all--both the good and the bad. To further develop a clearer picture, we spoke with SNCO's, NCO's, and junior enlisted men--those Marines most affected by the actions of the organization. It was our desire to see how it looks, not only from the top down, but also from the perspective of the young Marine. They told us how excellence looks and feels from first hand experience, and about the balanced excellence that the top-running units aspire to achieve. We were told that excellent battalions make every day count whether in garrison or in the field, for as far as they are concerned, every day is record day.

The importance of inspections was also stressed. Not so much in their results, but what that impending inspection does to the "psyche" of the unit beforehand. The many inspections that confront a battalion today, are aimed at testing its material readiness and logistical soundness. Balanced excellence demands that we as professionals know logistics--inside and out. Excellent units realize that without material care and sound logistics, they may never reach the line of departure.

Time and time again we heard how the superior battalion ensures that a "zero defects" environment does not exist within the organization. The young leaders are given the freedom to fail--to try things out--and to learn

from their mistakes. They are delegated authority to do their jobs and given increasing responsibility as they grow.

We were told that a major influence on a battalion's "ability to be excellent" was its position in the deployment cycle. The senior Marines we spoke with emphasized that "snapshot in time" comparisons of two outfits may not present a clear picture of what actually exists. We found there were many significant factors--such as "organizational turbulence" and "the learning curve" that must be considered when judging excellence.

An excellent battalion never forgets its mission--to locate, close with and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver. When setting priorities and intermediate objectives they maintain the proper sight picture of that mission. They work hard. They get out into the field and train. They're good in garrison as well, but they don't get wrapped around the "in-out basket". They make their training realistic and challenging, and always emphasize and build upon small unit skills--the basics.

The successful battalion builds an environment of excellence. They draw upon the "Marine ethic" that has carried our Corps so well. They foster a winning atmosphere of teamwork, loyalty, and esprit de corps. They show concern and caring for their Marines and for their families as well. Excellent battalions embrace and never compromise the basic tenants of high standards and firm discipline. A climate of positive reinforcement prevades throughout the excellent outfit, and their Marines truly enjoy what they do.

Finally, to bring this all together, is the commander. He is the linchpin to the success of the excellent battalion. The excellence of the commander is reflected by his men and the organization. Evidence of his positive leadership is seen throughout the battalion. He passes on his knowledge. He

develops subordinate leaders through a father to son, teacher to pupil relationship. He orchestrates the movement of his unit towards balanced excellence. He never lets his unit lose sight of the mission and ensures that they are ready to fight. He builds an "environment of excellence" for his Marines.

Our research was not the first study of excellence in the Marine Corps--nor will it be the last. It's not a "cook-book" for excellence and the attributes and characteristics discussed are not the definitive elements of excellence. What we did was tell you what we heard from those Marines we spoke with. We conveyed their message. It's their picture of excellence within Marine Corps infantry battalions--and it was drawn by Marines young and old. It was inspiring to witness the high standards of excellence being passed on--from father to son, teacher to pupil. What we heard about excellence came from the hearts of those Marines we spoke with. It's the excellence in our heritage--of those who have gone before us. It's the excellence in our future--for those Marines yet to come--and it's the essence of excellence, present in our Marines and in our Corps, today.

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

We heard it from all senior officers we spoke with--an excellent commander is requisite for an excellent unit. He is the key to the success of the battalion. We were told that rarely will you find an excellent unit that does not have an excellent leader--he is that critical to the success of the organization. We didn't ask the senior officers we spoke to, how they felt about command selection. The following comments evolved from our discussion and conversations about the commander and his critical link to

the success of the unit. With that in mind, here is the opinion of one general officer that was shared by many others. "The present way we are going with the 18 - 24 months in command has got to help the battalions. It will allow the commander enough of an opportunity to leave his imprint. He'll be there long enough to allow people to know him, what he wants, and how he does business. There also has to be some institutional arrangement to ensure that the right people get into the command positions. We haven't come that step yet, but we need to look very carefully at those we select for command. Right now it's in the province of the commanding general to select from whoever shows up or is available at the time. I'm not prepared to say that we should have headquarters select battalion commanders, but I will say that those we send to the Fleet Marine Force should be qualified to command. Every organization wants the best people--some go to headquarters, some to staff jobs--but some superbly qualified Marines never get to command battalions. The most qualified leaders must get the battalions because our troops deserve no less than the best leaders the Marine Corps has to offer."

A colonel echoed those sentiments a bit more strongly, "I think we should go to command selection. I don't feel we are completely in tune with the commandants' message concerning unit stability and the need to get the best commanders into positions of leadership. How can we, without some sort of formal selection process similar to that of the Army or Navy? Presently those who get to command are only those who are available at the right place at the right time. Sometimes the best leaders don't get selected simply because there aren't any command slots open when they become available. If it's that important to get the best commanders to our Marines, because they deserve no less, then let's formalize the process and ensure

that only the best get there. Particularly when command time has been expanded from 18 - 24 months which will result in fewer and fewer lieutenant colonels getting a command." Another colonel added, "I think we need command selection. We need to take 'who you know' out of the process. Let's gauge command selection on where you've been and how you've done. In the Marine Corps, you have to look long and hard to find a bad officer--but not all are capable of command. They may be good staff officers or instructors and it's about time we recognize that fact. We compete at everything on every level within the Marine Corps, why not command? Battalions shouldn't be training aids for lieutenant colonels not prepared to assume command!"

Not all officers favored command selection, although they all agreed that our Marines deserve no less than the best commanders we have to offer. A regimental commander, not in favor of command selection, offered the following suggestion. "I would like to see a commanders school--it's something the Army does. Amphibious Warfare School and the Command and Staff College are too staff oriented. We need a school that is command oriented--one that emphasizes the details of command. Most commanders are tacticians and can function as the 'operations officer', but the problems arise when the commander can't be the administration, the logistics, or the fiscal officer. The successful commander of today has to understand it all. All that commanders have now is past experience or whatever gets passed down to them. There is no school that teaches the basic fundamentals. A commanders school could alleviate a lot of that ignorance or lack of experience in particular areas. The officer, once selected for command, would attend this school in the days prior to the assumption of command.

There he'd be refreshed on the material, logistic and administrative details required today. It's not a leadership course, nor one in tactics--if he doesn't have a handle on them at this stage, he never will. The Army's school comes about after command selection--I don't want to see that in the Corps--never do I want to see command selection. Heaven forbid the day when a board at headquarters makes command selection. The general in the field has a greater grasp of the situation at hand than any board ever could. He knows the needs of the particular unit and in most cases has a pretty good grasp of the command talent available. I can't see any benefit in a board making a selection based on the 'tickets' the man has punched, even if it's just a screening process. Our system works well as it is today, it's the best of any service."

It's obvious that the matter won't be decided here. We're not suggesting that something even needs to be done but we do recommend that further consideration be given to this subject as it was a rather "active issue" to those we spoke with. We felt the sincerity and frankness of the comments we heard warranted their inclusion as a recommendation for further study.

As a final question during our interviews, we asked if there was anything that could or should be done to foster an increased level of excellence within all infantry battalions. We heard various responses but the central theme revolved around the young Marines--those officers and men who will carry our Corps into the future. Every Marine with whom we spoke, emphasized that the quality of the men and women now entering the Corps has never been better, and the future of the Marine Corps has never looked brighter. Excellent battalions, we were told, get that way because they work at it. As a team, they aspire to achieve their high, self-imposed standards. It's a

team effort and there is no member more important than the young Marine. Everything we do, or do not do, affects him. A colonel told us how important that young Marine is to the team. "You've really got to make those youngsters enjoy coming to work each day. They've got to love the fact that they are coming to work because they are going to do something new, exciting, and challenging. To make this happen, leaders must delegate authority and allow them to do their thing. Anybody who doesn't realize that the troops can look after them better than they could ever look after themselves, is dumb. Put your faith and trust in the troops and they will do wondrous, wondrous things!"

We heard many officers comment about the positive affects the commandants' continuity of command has had on outfits throughout the Marine Corps. They cautioned, however, that we must pay more attention to the stability at the lower echelons within the battalion. One regimental commander described the personnel picture within his battalions. "Our gross statistics may look good, but on any given day we have men coming and going. A commander and his staff will probably stay in their tour for several years, but below that level, constant turnover is experienced. At the sergeant and below level, it has been our experience that the majority aren't coming out of the Infantry Training School (ITS), but from other billets outside of the FMF. They join predeployment training at various stages, and may join only weeks before deployment."

Fleet Assistance Program (FAP) and Temporary Additional Duty (TAD) quotas also influence the stability of an organization at lower levels. As one colonel stated, "If a young man becomes a Marine to be a machinegunner, he expects to be a machinegunner, not a messman." We were told that too many

Marines were being siphoned away from the battalion to support these programs. Some noted that it was a cost of doing business, but a very high cost. These programs often impact most heavily on the small units--the platoons, squads, and fire teams. It's these small units that are the foundation to the success of the battalion. Any effort to strengthen the stability of this foundation can only create a stronger organization.

Although it has been studied before and will be studied again, many officers felt there should be continued effort to look for ways to reduce the number of Marines that leave the battalion to support these programs. "Why", a colonel told us, "should a battalion just arriving on Okinawa for deployment, be tasked to provide a gunnery sergeant to run the SNCO barracks? Couldn't a civilian or a Marine on a three year accompanied tour fill the billet?" Similarly we heard many comments regarding civilian contracts to run the mess facilities, which again would free Marines to work and train in their assigned MOS. We feel that these are all valid considerations that need to be continually addressed.

In retrospect, there are a lot of questions that we wished we would have asked. However, we are compelled to ask the question that we didn't have the time to pursue. "Do the same attributes and characteristics apply across the board to all organizations within the Marine Corps?" In other words, could we make this a "generic" research effort and apply it to aviation and artillery units as well? Thought provoking as it may be, we feel it's a fair assumption to answer "affirmative". For every time a Marine used the word "battalion" another used the more generic term "organization", or "outfit" or "unit". We think of it as another dimension of the Marine ethic--where just being a Marine is enough.

From the senior Marines who will leave their Corps in our hands, the message was clear--carry the torch high. They emphasized that excellence can only be achieved through hard work and a continuous team effort. It takes an environment of excellence that is imaginatively fostered and allowed to grow through the development of young leaders. Never lose sight of the mission, they told us, and to that end, challenge all Marines with exciting and rewarding training. And above all, never waiver on the high standards of excellence on which our Corps is founded.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Summaries of all senior officer interviews are on file at the Naval Postgraduate School.
- <sup>2</sup> Summaries of interviews with SNCO's, NCO's and junior enlisted men are on file at the Naval Postgraduate School.
- <sup>3</sup> An E-tool, entrenching tool, is a small multi-purpose shovel.
- <sup>4</sup> Various Marine Corps inspections: Marine Corps Disbursing On-Site Examination Team (MCDOSET); Field Supply Maintenance Analysis Office (FSMAO); Supply Maintenance Analysis Team (SMAT).
- <sup>5</sup> Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation System (MCCRES).
- <sup>6</sup> Lieutenant Colonel William G. Leftwich Jr., United States Marine Corps, was the recipient of the Navy Cross for combat heroism during the Vietnam War. The Leftwich Trophy was established in memory of him, and is presented annually to a deserving captain serving in the FMF ground force. It represents the Marine Corps' highest award for leadership to a commissioned officer.
- <sup>7</sup> Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES).

## **APPENDIX. THE INFANTRY BATTALION**

As stated in Fleet Marine Force Manual 6-3 (FMFM 6-3) the infantry battalion is the basic tactical unit of ground combat power in the United States Marine Corps. The battalion has a stated mission to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy through fire and maneuver, or to repel his assault by fire and close combat. Its command structure is capable of integrating the efforts of attached and supporting units, and is structured to facilitate the formation of task organization.

The battalion is capable of self-administration, and its logistic capability is compatible with its mobility and combat power. A typical battalion is commanded by a lieutenant colonel infantry officer. There are five subordinate units consisting of three rifle companies, a weapons company, and a headquarters and service company. Companies are commanded by captains. The rifle companies are the basic tactical units with which the battalion accomplishes its mission. The current 1038C series table of organization, staffs the battalion with 824 officer and enlisted Marines, and 69 Navy officers and enlisted.

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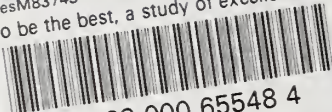
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